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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000524

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, SA/PD, S/CT, DS/DSS/ITA,
DSERCC, INR/NESA, AND NEA/NGA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [ECON](#) [ASEC](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [MV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: TFIZ01: Maldives issues statement re Iraq;
Religious groups down on war; More rallies planned

Refs: (A) Colombo-SA/INS 03/26/03 e-mail

- (B) Colombo 512, and previous
- (C) Colombo 170 (all Notal)

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of
Mission. Reasons: 1.5 (B, D).

[11.](#) (C) This update, focused on reaction to the war in
Iraq in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, reviews:

>> In its first public statement, the Maldivian
government says it is "very concerned" about the war

>> In Sri Lanka, religious groups issue statements
against the war

>> More anti-war rallies in the works

>> Spotlight on two major Sri Lankan opponents of the
war: Alavi Moulana and Baddegama Samitha

>> Local concerns sprout re potential economic problems
caused by war, as the GSL seeks to dispel them

((Note: Latest media coverage is provided Septel.)))

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Maldives Issues Statement
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[12.](#) (U) The Maldivian government has issued its first
public statement re the Iraq conflict. Although only
posted on the GoRM's website on March 26, the statement
is dated March 21. It was issued in the name of
President Maumoon Gayoom. In its key political
reference, it states:

"The Maldives is very concerned over the grave dangers
to which the Muslim people of Iraq are being exposed by
the war. The government hopes that the military
operations would end very soon, and with minimal
destruction and injury to the brotherly people of Iraq.
The Maldives desires peace, stability, and security for
the region."

[13.](#) (U) The rest of the page-long statement reviews
various measures the government is taking in reaction to
the start of the war. These measures include forming a
government committee to monitor Gulf events, the
cancellation of parties and receptions by the GoRM, and
suspension of all overseas government travel unless
deemed essential. (Note: The complete text of the
statement was e-mailed to SA/INS in Ref A.)

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Religious Groups Down on War
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[14.](#) (SBU) In Sri Lanka, two religious groups have
recently issued statements against the war. Colombo's
Grand Mosque issued a statement on March 25, for
example, which emphatically condemned the war.
(Note: The Grand Mosque is the major mosque in Colombo
and the most important in the country.) The statement
asserted, in part, that "It is sad to note that the U.S.
administration has ignored the appeals made by heads of
state and religious leaders to further explore peaceful
means of disarming Iraq...It is not too late for the
United States to reconsider its decision."

[15.](#) (U) In the meantime, the National Christian Council
(NCC), an umbrella organization for Protestant churches
(Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist), issued a statement
on March 26 which "deplored" the start of the war. The
NCC statement went on to comment: "The experiences we
have had in our own country strengthens our conviction
that dialogue and negotiation alone can evolve into
permanent and lasting resolution." (Note: In other
reaction, comments by local Roman Catholic Church

prelates have mirrored the anti-war perspective of Pope John Paul II. Major Buddhist and Hindu leaders have basically steered clear of commenting on the war, thus far. See below, however, re anti-war role of Buddhist monk and MP Baddegama Samitha.)

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New Anti-War Rallies in the Works

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16. (SBU) Thus far, anti-war demonstrations in Sri Lanka have neither been frequent, nor particularly large. Anti-war organizers, however, are trying again, and on Friday, March 28, several rallies are in the works at various sites. From what we have picked up, at least two rallies are being planned in Colombo, including one at Galle Face Green, a large sea front park down-the-road from the embassy. Both rallies are slated to kick off after Friday mid-day prayers, so that Muslims -- presumably energized by anti-war sermons -- can join in right from the mosque. Various rallies are also planned in Muslim-dominated areas in the Eastern Province (where there are many radicalized Muslims due to the conflict with the Tamil Tigers), in parts of the south, and north of Colombo. The sponsorship of these rallies continues to be pretty much evenly split among various Muslim groups and the radical left Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

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Two Key Anti-War Figures

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17. (C) While the anti-war effort in Sri Lanka has not seemed to have taken off as of yet, two politicians are playing major roles in organizing opposition, thus far. The two, Alavi Moulana and Baddegama Samitha, are coming to the anti-war effort from different angles. Moulana, 71, the Governor of the Western Province (where Colombo is located) and a former People's Alliance (PA) minister, is a major Muslim leader, who has been canvassing the Muslim community for support against U.S. policy in Iraq. A former trade unionist, Moulana is also trying to tap into his union connections. In this effort, Moulana -- who is believed to maintain many connections in the Middle East -- has made some sharply critical comments about the U.S.

18. (C) The other leader, Venerable Baddegama Samitha, 51, is a Buddhist monk and member of the PA, who was elected to Parliament in the December 2001 general election. (Note: Samitha is the first Buddhist monk ever to sit in Parliament. He is a member, somewhat bizarrely given his clerical status, of a small Trotskyite faction of the PA.) Within the PA, Samitha is a strongly pro-peace process voice, unlike some other elements in the grouping. Re Iraq, however, Samitha has taken a sharply anti-U.S. tack, personally leading some anti-war demonstrations. When he is not politicking, Samitha runs his own temple in the Galle area in the south of the country.

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Local Concerns re the Economy

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19. (SBU) In other Iraq-related news, press articles and contacts are increasingly mentioning worries that Sri Lanka's economy could possibly be hurt by a long war. These concerns revolve around fears that gasoline prices might spike, that Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East might lose their jobs, that tourism might tank, and that tea sales might suffer. (Note: See Ref C, for a detailed review of these concerns.) Thus far, the Sri Lankan government has worked hard to dispel the concerns. The GSL, for example, has underscored that it has enough gas in reserve to handle needs if there is an emergency. Moreover, the government has pointed out that hardly any of the over 700,000 Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East have had to come home and, thus, remittances remain intact. While sales of tea are down in the important Middle Eastern market, the government believes that sales will rebound. Finally, tourism has not seemed to suffer in any appreciable fashion.

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COMMENT

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10. (C) The Maldivian government's statement was not particularly helpful, but not harmful either. In making it, our guess is that the GoRM was reacting to its public, which is reportedly largely anti-war (the Maldives is 100 percent Muslim). Re Sri Lanka, our assessment is that a wide swath of the populace is also against the war, but the depth of concern is vague and not very deep. Only among the Muslim minority have we noticed anything approaching passion. That said,

although their efforts have barely managed to register, so far, Muslims groups and the Sinhalese left appear committed to trying to torque up their anti-war campaign. END COMMENT.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS